

# The Rôle of Dance in the Ritual Therapy of the Anastenaria\*

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The Anastenaria is a ritual involving trance and possession which is performed in several villages and towns in northern Greece.<sup>1</sup> It is a ritual system of psychotherapy which is often effective in treating illnesses that in Western psychiatric terms would be considered psychogenic in nature. This paper focuses on the rôle of the dance of the possessed Anastenarides in the therapeutic system of the Anastenaria. I hope to show that this dance contributes to the therapeutic effectiveness of the Anastenaria because it provides the Anastenarides with an opportunity to experience a cathartic release of anxiety, to structure this cathartic experience, and to transform a state of anxiety, suffering, and illness into a state of joy, power, and health.

The Anastenaria was performed in north-eastern Thrace near the Black Sea until 1913 when the present border between

\* The field work upon which this paper is based was carried out among the Anastenarides of Ayia Eleni in the nome of Serres in Greek Macedonia between September 1975 and October 1976. This research was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. I would like to thank Professor Vincent Crapanzano of Queens College for his many helpful suggestions as well as the residents of Ayia Eleni for their hospitality and cooperation. For a more detailed discussion of the Anastenaria as a ritual system of psychotherapy see L. Danforth, *The Anastenaria: A Study in Greek Ritual Therapy* (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1978).

1. Although the word 'Anastenaria' is plural in Greek, I use it in the singular in English to refer to an entire ritual complex seen as an integrated whole.

Turkey and Bulgaria was established. At this time a small area in north-eastern Thrace that had previously been Turkish territory fell permanently under Bulgarian control. Among the many Greeks who were forced to flee this area a year later were the Kostilides, residents of Kosti, the most important of the villages and towns where the Anastenaria was performed. The largest group of refugees from Kosti eventually settled in the village of Ayia Eleni in the nome of Serres, where the Anastenaria continues to be performed regularly.<sup>2</sup> The Anastenaria is also performed in the town of Langadas and in several other villages in Greek Macedonia where Kostilides have settled.

Although the Anastenaria is denounced by officials of the Greek Orthodox Church as a sacrilegious survival of pre-Christian idolatrous rites, it exists within the religious and cosmological context of the Orthodox Church and draws heavily on Orthodox symbolism, beliefs, and ritual practices.<sup>3</sup>

On certain important feast days in the calendar of the Greek Orthodox Church the Anastenarides of Ayia Eleni, approximately twelve women and two men, who are referred to collectively as the 'group of twelve' (*δωδεκάδα*), gather at the house of the chief Anastenaris (*ἀρχιαναστενάρης*). It is in this house, known as the *κονάκι*, that the Anastenarian icons of SS. Constantine and Helen are kept.<sup>4</sup> These icons, which are said to have been miraculously revealed to the Anastenarides many years ago in Kosti, are kept on an 'icon shelf' (*σταυρίδι*) in the *konaki*. Each has a handle so that it may be carried easily during the dances and processions of the Anastenarides. These icons are partially enclosed in cloth coverings (*ποδιές*) to which are attached a great many votive offerings in the form of small metal

2. The village of Ayia Eleni, which in 1976 had a population of approximately seven hundred, is composed of several distinct ethnic groups, the most important of which are the Kostilides and the indigenous Macedonians. Ayia Eleni is a fairly wealthy agricultural village which lies within the irrigation network of the Strymon River.

3. For a clear statement of the position of the Greek Orthodox Church in regard to the Anastenaria see Θρησκευτική καὶ ήθική ἐγκυκλοπαιδεία, III (Athens, 1963), pp. 634–7.

4. The word *konaki*, which is derived from the Turkish *konak* meaning 'mansion' or 'government house', was used by Greeks living in areas under Turkish rule to refer to the building which housed the local administrative authorities.

plaques (*ἀσημικά*). Carefully draped over the icons and the *stasidi* are many large red kerchiefs, known as *σημάδια*, which are associated with particular Anastenarian icons and which are believed to possess the power of those icons. To one side of the *stasidi* is a table where anyone entering the *konaki* may leave offerings of olive oil or incense and light a candle before he ‘greets’ (*χαιρετάει*) the Anastenarian icons and *simadia* and takes a seat on the low benches around the room.

The culmination of the yearly ritual cycle of the Anastenaria is the festival (*πανηγύρι*) of SS. Constantine and Helen, which begins on the eve of 21 May and continues for three days. Anastenarides and faithful Kostilides throughout Greek Macedonia gather at the *konaki* early on the eve of 21 May. Shortly thereafter at a signal from the *archianastenaris* the music of the three-stringed Thracian lyre (*λύρα*) and the large drum (*νταουλή*) begins, and the Anastenarides enter a state of trance and begin to dance.<sup>5</sup> The Anastenarides believe that when they begin to dance St. Constantine ‘seizes’ or ‘calls’ them (*τοὺς πιάνει ὁ Ἅγιος, τούς καλεῖ ὁ Ἅγιος*), and that as long as they dance he is both in control of and responsible for all their actions. The Anastenarides may dance for twenty to thirty minutes. Then, after a short break, they dance again. This process continues until the ritual gathering breaks up at approximately midnight.

On the morning of 21 May the Anastenarides gather at the *konaki* and, accompanied by candle bearers and musicians, proceed to the sacred well (*άγιασμα*) at the edge of the village where they sacrifice a black lamb to St. Constantine. Throughout the day the Anastenarides dance in the *konaki*. Shortly after dark they are notified that the large fire which had been lit several hours earlier in a field near the *ayiasma* has burned down to form a huge mass of glowing red coals. Then they proceed barefoot from the *konaki* to the site of the fire, where several thousand people have gathered to witness the spectacular firewalk.

5. The dance of the Anastenarides is a uniquely sacred version of the common ‘kerchief dance’ (*μαντιλάτος χορός*), which in this context is danced individually. At the *konaki* and during the firewalk it is danced to a tune with a 2/4 rhythm known as ‘the tune of the dance’ (*ὁ σκοπὸς τοῦ χοροῦ*), while during the processions of the Anastenarides from one place to another it is danced to a tune with a 7/8 rhythm known as ‘the tune of the road’ (*ὁ σκοπὸς τοῦ δρόμου*).

As the Anastenarides, fifteen to twenty in number, approach the fire, several men spread out the mound of coals with long wooden poles until it forms a large oval bed about three metres wide, eight metres long, and several centimetres deep. Then the Anastenarides enter the fire, carrying icons and *simadia* of SS. Constantine and Helen. They dance back and forth across the coals, stirring up showers of sparks and glowing embers with their feet. Some Anastenarides bend down at the edge of the fire and pound the coals with their open palms, shouting, 'May it turn to ashes' (*Στάχτη νὰ γίνει*). They continue dancing until the fire is completely extinguished and nothing remains but a bed of harmless grey ash. Then they return to the *konaki*, where a meal is served to all present.

During the next two days of the *paniyiri* the Anastenarides, with the icons and *simadia* of SS. Constantine and Helen, proceed through the village visiting every house. The *paniyiri* concludes with a second firewalk on the evening of 23 May. The Anastenarides, who see themselves as servants of St. Constantine, believe that they alone are able to perform the firewalk without being burned because they are protected by St. Constantine's supernatural power.<sup>6</sup>

The Anastenia is above all a system of ritual therapy concerned with the diagnosis and treatment of a wide variety of illnesses. It is, however, only one of many therapeutic systems that are available to the residents of Ayia Eleni. The decision of a sick person to consult either a university trained physician, a village folk healer (*πρακτικός*), or the *archianastenaris* is influenced by many factors, including the nature of his symptoms, his own opinion as to the cause of his illness, and certain other considerations specifically related to the Anastenia which will be discussed shortly.

The patient may resort to several different therapeutic systems simultaneously, or one after the other, in an attempt to find a cure. He is likely to suspect that his illness is associated with the

6. The most useful accounts of the Anastenia by Greek folklorists are the following: K. Romaios, *Λαϊκές λατρείες τῆς Θράκης, Ἀρχείον τοῦ Θρακικοῦ Λαογραφικοῦ καὶ Γλωσσικοῦ Θησαυροῦ*, XI (1944–5), 1–181; G. Megas, *Ἀναστενάρια καὶ ἔθιμα τῆς Τυρινής Δευτέρας, Λαογραφία*, XIX (1961), 472–534; K. Kakouri, *Διονυσιακά* (Athens, 1963); and a series of articles by P. Papachristodoulou and others that appeared in *Ἀρχείον τοῦ Θρακικοῦ Λαογραφικοῦ καὶ Γλωσσικοῦ Θησαυροῦ* between 1934 and 1961.

Anastenaria if he exhibits any of the following symptoms: unusual, obsessive, or deviant behaviour, particularly of a religious nature, or involving fire; persistent dreams or visions concerning the Anastenaria; periods of unconsciousness, paralysis, or involuntary and uncontrolled activity; or states of depression or anxiety characterized by general malaise and an inability to eat, sleep, or work. An initial diagnosis that a person is suffering from an illness associated with the Anastenaria is strengthened if he is an *ἀκραμπάς*, that is, if he is a descendant of an Anastenaris or of someone who is responsible for the care of an Anastenarian icon.<sup>7</sup> It is also strengthened if he is known to have ridiculed the Anastenaria or if the onset of his symptoms happened to coincide with an important ritual gathering of the Anastenarides.

When such a diagnosis is made, it is said that the individual ‘is suffering from the saint’ (*ὑποφέρει ἀπ’ τὸν Ἅγιο*), or that he ‘is suffering from those things’ (*ὑποφέρει ἀπ’ αὐτὰ τὰ πράματα*), that is, from the Anastenaria. The patient or a member of his family must then consult the *archianastenaris*, who usually suggests that the Anastenarides gather at the patient’s house. After the patient has discussed with them the onset of his illness and his present condition, an Anastenarissa may suddenly begin to rock back and forth in her seat and clap violently several times or jump to her feet and dance for a few seconds. She will then shout out a command to the patient. This command is believed to be an expression of the will of St. Constantine. The Anastenarissa is said to speak ‘with the power of the saint’ (*μὲ τὴ δύναμη τοῦ Ἅγιον*).

The utterances of the Anastenarides are invariably orders to correct some ‘ritual fault’ (*σφάλμα*) committed by the patient or a member of his family, or to serve the saint by the performance of some ritual task. For example, the patient may be told that in order to regain his health he must repaint his family icon, that he must sacrifice a lamb to St. Constantine, or that he must serve the saint by regularly attending the ritual gatherings of the Anastenarides. The saint is believed to have caused the patient’s suffering in order to force him to act to correct his ritual fault or to serve the saint in the desired manner. When the patient carries out the instructions of the Anastenarides, or when he merely

7. The word *akrabas* is derived from the Turkish *akraba* meaning ‘relatives’.

agrees to carry them out, he often experiences an improvement in his condition. This improvement is attributed to the beneficent power of St. Constantine, who, it is believed, has forgiven the patient for the commission of his ritual fault and is pleased with his subsequent service to the Anastenaria. Regardless of the specific recommendations of the Anastenarides, a patient who believes that he has been cured by St. Constantine usually feels obligated to attend the ritual gatherings of the Anastenarides. Quite often he is subsequently 'seized' or 'called' by the saint, begins to dance, and becomes an Anastenaris himself.<sup>8</sup>

This process of diagnosis and therapy is illustrated by the following accounts of how two people, whom I shall call Maria and Kostas, became involved with the Anastenaria.

Maria was married when she was nineteen. She went to live in a small house with her husband and her mother-in-law. Several months later her mother died. Then Maria fell ill. She was sick for three years and suffered a great deal. She didn't want to eat or drink; all she did was lie in bed. Her husband and her mother-in-law would put her in a cart to take her to the doctor in Serres. As soon as they were outside of the village, she would feel much better; but she was ashamed to tell anyone. When they reached Serres, the doctor would say that there was nothing wrong with her and that she should go to some churches to seek help.

Her aunt, who was an Anastenarissa, would often come to her house when Maria was sick. She would tell Maria that she was suffering from 'those things' [the Anastenaria]. She was suffering because Saint Constantine wanted her to serve him. Other Anastenarides would also come to her house to visit her. While they were in the house, she felt better; but when they left, she felt worse.

Finally her mother-in-law invited all the Anastenarides to come to her house. They said that in order for Maria to get well she must come regularly to the *konaki* and serve the saint. Her father was there too, so he gave his opinion. He said that

8. If a patient carries out the recommendations of the Anastenarides and yet fails to experience any improvement in his condition, he may invite the Anastenarides to his house again. They will either recommend a new course of action or tell him that he is not in fact 'suffering from the saint' and that he should consult a physician.

he was against the Anastenaria and that he would rather see his daughter in the graveyard than see her dancing in the *konaki*. But her mother-in-law said, ‘Now her husband and I are in charge of her.’ So Maria’s father left, since there was nothing more he could do. Then the *archianastenaris* said, ‘You will get up, and you will come all by yourself to the *paniyiri*.’ From that time on she gradually got better. At the very first *paniyiri* she attended, she danced and entered the fire. She has performed the firewalk every year since then, and she has remained healthy.

During the Balkan Wars Kostas was sent into exile in Asia Minor. He was separated from his parents and brothers and never saw any of them again. When he returned to Bulgaria, he got married and had a child. Then he was forced to serve in the Bulgarian army for three years. During this time his wife and child died. When he was released from the army, he married a woman who was known to be barren.

After Kostas and his wife arrived in Ayia Eleni, they adopted a child. Kostas was a good man. He worked hard in his fields; he enjoyed hunting and fishing; and he spent his evenings in the coffeehouse with the other men of the village.

But then he began to suffer. He became melancholy and introverted. He was afraid of everything. He was even afraid to go out to work in his fields. He couldn’t work; he couldn’t eat; and he couldn’t sleep. He didn’t want to talk to people. He stopped going to the coffeehouse and just stayed home all the time. When people came to visit him, he wouldn’t talk to them at all. He wouldn’t even acknowledge their presence. He would just get wild and angry. Sometimes he didn’t even recognize people.

In the evenings he would run off into the fields or to the church and sleep there alone; or else he would lock his wife out of his house and sleep alone there. During the day he would just sit at home. He was completely illiterate, but he taught himself how to read. He read the Bible and various prayer books all day.

Sometimes he would leave his house and run to the river at the edge of the village. From there he would run to the *konaki* where he would cross himself repeatedly and kiss the icons. From there he would go into the fields to the graveyard and

then to the church where he would light candles and pray. Then he would go back to his house and read.

This lasted for three years. During this period he called the Anastenarides several times. They would meet at his house and each time an Anastenaris would tell him something different to do. One time he was told to build a *stasidi* for his family icons. He built one, but he didn't get well. Finally the *archianastenaris* told him that he had to fix an old Anastenarian icon of Saints Constantine and Helen which had been partially destroyed and hidden in a trunk in a *konaki* in another village. After several attempts he finally found the icon and brought it to an icon painter in Serres, who repaired the icon and repainted it. But the icon was not properly painted, and so Kostas got worse instead of better. Then he took the icon back to the painter to have it painted properly.

A few months later at the *paniyiri* of Saints Constantine and Helen he was at the *konaki* with the other Anastenarides when he suddenly ran from the *konaki* and went to the site of the firewalk. He went running into the fire while the flames were still shoulder high. People couldn't even see him. Everyone thought he would die. But he came out of the fire unharmed. He became an Anastenaris, and since then he has been fine.

Every year since then he has danced in the fire. He doesn't hunt any more, and he doesn't go to the coffeehouse as often as he used to. He prefers to stay home and read the Bible. He has become a very religious man.

Rituals involving trance and possession are performed in many societies throughout the world.<sup>9</sup> It is widely accepted that

9. For the conceptual distinction which is usually made between trance (a psychobiological condition characterized by dissociation, loss of control, and hypersuggestibility) and possession (the cultural interpretation or explanation of such a state), see A. F. C. Wallace, 'Cultural Determinants of Response to Hallucinatory Experience', *A.M.A. Archives of General Psychiatry*, I (1959), 74–85 and I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Baltimore, 1971), pp. 37–65. Important studies of rituals involving trance and possession in various parts of the world include: J. Belo, *Trance in Bali* (New York, 1960); V. Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry* (Berkeley, 1973); H. Jeanmaire, *Dionysos; histoire du culte de Bacchus* (Paris, 1951); W. La Barre, *They Shall Take Up Serpents: Psychology of the Southern Snake Handling Cult* (New York, 1969); and A. Metraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York, 1959).

such rituals are often therapeutically effective in the treatment of illness of a psychogenic nature, which may be caused at least in part by persistent anxieties and tensions that result from situations involving psychological or sociocultural conflict.<sup>10</sup> Explanations for the therapeutic effectiveness of these rituals have stressed a variety of factors, some of which play an important part in Western systems of psychotherapy.

Group support is often cited as a therapeutic factor which is essential to the effectiveness of many non-Western systems of psychotherapy.<sup>11</sup> The patient receives attention, comfort, and sympathy from members of the cult group of which he becomes a member in the course of treatment. In the case of the Anastenaria a person who is believed to be 'suffering from the saint' is visited frequently by individual Anastenarides, who assure him that he has nothing to worry about, that St. Constantine will help him, and that he will soon recover. In addition, becoming an Anastenaris may actually mobilize group support in such a way as to rearticulate the patient's important social relationships and 'reduce socially generated tensions that are in part responsible for the patient's condition'.<sup>12</sup> For example, a patient often requires the help of his relatives in correcting the ritual fault which is held responsible for his illness. Similarly, in order for a woman to become an Anastenarissa and to dance publicly in the *konaki*, her husband and sometimes even her parents or her parents-in-law must give her their permission. In this way important members of the woman's family demonstrate their concern for her in a public context and commit themselves to assisting her in her attempt to regain her health by giving her permission to become an Anastenarissa and to dance. If a woman is unable to become an

10. See the contributions in *Case Studies in Spirit Possession*, ed. V. Crapanzano and V. Garrison (New York, 1977). In the case of the Anastenaria, the following anxiety-provoking situations are often partially responsible for the psychogenic illnesses treated by the Anastenaria: the death of a parent or other close relative, the difficult relationship between stepchild and stepparent, and marriage, especially for a woman, who is separated from her family of origin and brought to live with her in-laws in the house of her husband.

11. S. Messing, 'Group Therapy and Social Status in the Zar Cult of Ethiopia', in *Culture and Mental Health*, ed. M. K. Opler (New York, 1959), p. 326; J. G. Kennedy, 'Nubian Zar Ceremonies as Psychotherapy', *Human Organization*, XXVI (1967), 101.

12. Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha*, p. 215.

Anastenarissa because her husband does not believe in the rite and refuses to let her dance, then she will continue to suffer, since her husband has interfered with the will of St. Constantine.

Also of therapeutic importance is the fact that ritual systems of therapy such as the Anastenaria provide the patient with a conceptual framework for the interpretation of what would otherwise be chaotic and threatening phenomena associated with his illness.<sup>13</sup> Not only does the patient receive an explanation for the cause of his illness, but a course of action is prescribed to him which, it is believed, will bring about a cure. The miraculous performances of the firewalk demonstrate the validity of the belief system of the Anastenaria, while the successful cures of other cult members, which are narrated in great detail at ritual gatherings in the *konaki*, attest to the effectiveness of the ritual therapy it provides. In this way the patient's feelings of anxiety and helplessness associated with his ignorance of his illness's cause and cure are relieved, since he now knows specifically why he is ill and what he must do to get well.

The fact that the patient is provided with a new social status when he becomes a member of a cult group such as the Anastenaria is also of therapeutic importance.<sup>14</sup> Corresponding to this change in social status is a change in social identity and self-image.<sup>15</sup> Within the community of those who believe in the Anastenaria, the new Anastenaris enjoys increased prestige and respect since he now has access to the superantural power of St. Constantine.

Trance also plays an essential part in the therapeutic system of rituals such as the Anastenaria. Particular attention has been paid to the cathartic function of these trance experiences.<sup>16</sup> It is often claimed that trance experiences interpreted as spirit

• 13. W. and F. Mischel, 'Psychological Aspects of Spirit Possession', *American Anthropologist*, LX (1958), 256; J. Frank, *Persuasion and Healing* (Baltimore, 1969), p. 63.

14. Mischel, op. cit., p. 254; Messing, op. cit., p. 320; and J. Koss, 'Therapeutic Aspects of Puerto Rican Cult Practices', *Psychiatry*, XXXVIII (1975), 160.

15. Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha*, p. 219.

16. A. F. C. Wallace, *Culture and Personality* (New York, 1970), p. 236; R. H. Prince, 'Forward', in *Case Studies in Spirit Possession*, ed. Crapanzano and Garrison, p. xiii.

possession are of therapeutic value because they periodically provide opportunities for the cathartic expression of behaviour which is usually socially unacceptable or unavailable. At such times one is able to enact behaviour which ranges from the passively dependent, to the sexually seductive, to the violently aggressive. Rituals involving trance and possession provide a context in which such behaviour may receive socially sanctioned expression because the possessing spirit, not the possessed individual, is held responsible.

All too often, however, explanations of the therapeutic value of the catharsis provided by such trance experiences have been phrased in a vague and superficial manner. The efficacy of the catharsis provided by rituals such as the Anastenaria has been explained in terms of a 'discharge of tension',<sup>17</sup> a 'letting off of steam',<sup>18</sup> and as a 'safety valve'.<sup>19</sup> As Young has pointed out, a significant weakness of attempts to explain the therapeutic effectiveness of rituals involving trance and possession has been 'their proclivity to use the concept of catharsis in an uncritical and reductionistic way'.<sup>20</sup>

Investigations of the role of hypnotic trance in Western systems of psychotherapy have suggested that the cathartic outbursts of intense emotion and motor discharge that often characterize hypnotic as well as ritually induced trance states are not necessarily of therapeutic value in and of themselves.<sup>21</sup> In order for such outbursts, which represent 'the dramatic reliving of repressed traumatic memories together with their painful and conflict-laden affect', to be of positive therapeutic value, they must be structured in such a way that an 'emotionally meaningful reconstitution takes place'.<sup>22</sup> The process of structuring these cathartic outbursts takes place in the carefully controlled context of the patient-therapist relationship in the

17. S. and R. Freed, 'Spirit Possession as Illness in a North Indian Village', *Ethnology*, III (1964), 166.

18. *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa*, ed. J. Beattie and J. Middleton (London, 1969), p. xxviii.

19. Kennedy, 'Nubian Zar Ceremonies as Psychotherapy', p. 189.

20. A. Young, 'Why Amhara Get Kureynna: Sickness and Possession in an Ethiopian Cult', *American Ethnologist*, II (1975), 568.

21. M. Gill and M. Brennan, *Hypnosis and Related States: Psychoanalytic Studies in Regression* (New York, 1966), p. 356.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 3 and 329.

case of Western systems of psychotherapy as well as in the highly structured ritual contexts of the Anastenaria and other non-Western systems of psychotherapy.

Rituals such as the Anastenaria furnish the suffering individual with a set of symbols with which he is able not only to articulate and give expression to the psychological and sociocultural conflicts which may have been partially responsible for his illness,<sup>23</sup> but also to resolve them symbolically by structuring the outburst of emotions associated with them. The process by which a ritual resolution of symbolically expressed conflict is able to bring about a structurally similar resolution at the psychological, sociocultural, and perhaps even the physiological level has been examined by Lévi-Strauss in his article 'The Effectiveness of Symbols'.<sup>24</sup>

According to Lévi-Strauss, ritual systems of psychotherapy provide the patient with 'a *language*, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be immediately expressed'. This makes it possible for the patient to 'undergo in an ordered and intelligible form a real experience that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible'. During the course of the therapeutic process the patient's experience becomes structured as he 'receives from the outside a social myth which does not correspond to a former personal state'. The patient's psychological and sociocultural reality is made to conform to this social myth, a myth which, unlike the patient's former personal state, is free from conflict. The ability of ritual systems of psychotherapy to structure the patient's psychological and sociocultural reality in accordance with a conflict-free social myth is attributed by Lévi-Strauss to 'the effectiveness of symbols'. According to Lévi-Strauss the effectiveness of symbols consists in the 'inductive property' that 'guarantees the harmonious parallel development' of structures in different orders of reality.<sup>25</sup>

I now propose to examine the role of dance in the ritual therapy of the Anastenaria in light of the theoretical framework outlined above. I hope to demonstrate that the dance of an Anastenaris is an expression of the anxiety and tension which

23. Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha*, p. 5.

24. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1963), pp. 186–205.

25. Ibid., pp. 198–201.

are associated with the conflicts which may have been partially responsible for his illness and that it provides him with an opportunity to experience motor discharge and a cathartic release of intense emotion. I also hope to demonstrate that this dance is able to structure this outburst in such a way as to render it therapeutically effective. Thus the dance of the possessed Anastenaris is both a symptom of his illness and an essential part of his cure. This therapeutic process will be examined both as it takes place over the course of the entire career of an Anastenaris (which extends from the initial diagnosis that he is suffering from the Anastenaria and which culminates when he is a well-respected member of the *dodekada*), and as it takes place over the course of a single dance.

A person who is suffering from an illness which is believed to have been caused by St. Constantine often shows signs of being possessed when the Anastenarides gather at his house in order to determine the cause of his illness. In such cases he may cry, tremble, or gesticulate in a manner suggestive of the dance of the Anastenarides. At these first signs of possession the *archianastenaris* ‘marks’ (*σημαδεύει*) him by placing a *simadi* over his shoulder or around his neck, indicating that from this point on he is in the process of becoming an Anastenaris and has an obligation to attend the ritual gatherings of the Anastenarides.

The initial trance experiences of an Anastenaris are often extremely difficult and unpleasant. It is said that he is suffering because St. Constantine is punishing or torturing him. His behaviour at this point is frequently wild, violent, or clumsy. Gradually, however, with the help of other, more experienced Anastenarides he begins to enter trance more easily and to dance more gracefully and freely. He ‘learns to be possessed’.<sup>26</sup> This is the point at which a person actually becomes an Anastenaris, or, as the Kostilides say, the point at which he ‘comes out [as an] Anastenaris’ (*Βγάτει Αναστενάρης*). From this point on the dance of the Anastenaris is no longer associated with punishment and suffering, but with joy and happiness. When the Anastenaris is dancing freely and easily, it is said that he is dancing ‘with the power of the saint’.

This is also the point at which the Anastenaris is likely to

<sup>26</sup>. Crapanzano, ‘Introduction’, in *Case Studies in Spirit Possession*, ed. Crapanzano and Garrison, p. 15.

situate his cure. The characteristic phrase of an Anastenaris describing how he became involved with the Anastenaria is: 'And then I came out, I danced, and I got well' (*Kai tóte βγῆκα, χόρεψα, καὶ ἔγινα καλά*). Just as the dance of the Anastenaris is transformed from suffering to joy, from punishment to power, so his state of illness is transformed into a state of health. As long as the Anastenaris continues to fulfill his ritual obligations to St. Constantine by participating regularly in the ritual gatherings of the Anastenaria, he will remain healthy.

That the process of becoming an Anastenaris provides a person with an opportunity to experience a cathartic release of the anxiety and tension associated with the conflicts that may have caused his illness is suggested by the image of 'coming out' which is regularly used to describe this process. Another image which emphasizes the fact that becoming an Anastenaris is a process of emerging, opening up, or being released from confinement is the image of the 'open road'. When an Anastenaris is finally able to dance freely and easily, it is said that St. Constantine 'has opened a road for him' (*τοῦ ἀνοίξε δρόμο*), or that 'his road was open' (*δ δρόμος του ἦταν ἀνοιχτός*). This image refers to the 'course' or 'path' a person follows in the process of becoming an Anastenaris and regaining his health. The same image is used in reference to the performance of any particular act associated with the Anastenaria. Thus an Anastenaris may say, 'I had a road to dance', or 'I had a road to enter the fire', implying that he had the power of the saint to do so.

If a young woman is experiencing a difficult trance and is unable to dance easily and freely, it is said that she has some 'obstacle' (*έμπόδιο*), or that 'something is preventing her' from becoming an Anastenarissa (*κάτι τὴν έμποδίζει*). The cause of this obstruction may be some ritual fault or the unwillingness of her husband to give her permission to dance.<sup>27</sup> In such cases she

<sup>27</sup>. Frequently the ritual fault itself involves the improper confinement or obstruction of an object sacred to St. Constantine. For example, an *ayiasma* may have been stopped up, or a piece of furniture may have been placed in front of an icon shelf. The correction of this ritual fault involves the release from confinement of the sacred object or the removal of that which is obstructing it. This process symbolizes the release of the supernatural power of St. Constantine and the cathartic release of becoming an Anastenaris which this power brings about.

continues to suffer because she is unable to ‘come out’ and experience the cathartic release provided by the dance. One young woman, who had experienced particularly difficult trance states until her husband finally gave her permission to dance, described her experience as follows:

When I started to dance, I suffered a great deal. I was not able to dance comfortably. It was as if there were chains on my feet. I wasn’t free. Then when my husband gave me permission to dance, my feet were untied. I was set free, and I danced.

The importance of the type of cathartic release which is involved in the process of becoming an Anastenaris is recognized by the Kostilides themselves. Like villagers in other parts of Greece, they believe that there is a close relationship between an individual’s emotional state and his state of health.<sup>28</sup> Kostilides believe that a wide variety of symptoms ranging from general malaise to deviant or ‘crazy’ behaviour, which are attributed to an illness known as *nevriká* (‘a nervous disorder’ or ‘a nervous condition’), are caused by the harmful effects of emotions such as anxiety, grief, despair, or anger on the ‘nervous system’ (*nevrikó σύστημα*).<sup>29</sup> Kostilides emphasize that if a person ‘collects’ (*μαζεύει*) or ‘swallows’ (*καταπίνει*) such emotions and if he is unable to express or give vent to them, then he may become sick. As one woman from Ayia Eleni told me:

If you keep all your anxieties inside you, you can suffer a nervous breakdown (*nevrikó κλονισμό*). In order for anxiety,

28. R. and E. Blum, *Health and Healing in Rural Greece* (Stanford, 1965), p. 122.

29. The obvious similarity between the symptoms of people suffering from *nevrika* and those of people ‘suffering from the saint’ is recognized by the Kostilides. However, these two ‘illnesses’ are mutually exclusive according to the diagnostic categories of the Kostilides. If someone experiencing any of the above symptoms is cured after consulting a ‘neurologist-psychiatrist’, then it is clear that he was suffering from *nevrika*. If, however, he is cured after carrying out the recommendations of the Anastenarides, or if he actually becomes an Anastenaris, then it is clear that he was ‘suffering from the saint’. In fact, Kostilides say that a person who is ‘suffering from the saint’ is not ‘sick’ (*ἀρρωστός*) and that he ‘has no illness’ (*δὲν ἔχει ἀσθέτεια*), since an ‘illness’, strictly speaking, is something that can be treated by a doctor.

anger, or depression to pass, you have to leave your house, go outside, and talk to people. If you don't give vent to your emotions, they can drive you crazy.

Kostilides generally agree that women are more likely to suffer from *nevrika* than men are because it is much more difficult for women to experience the type of cathartic release needed to render these emotions harmless. This in turn is attributed by both men and women to the confined nature of the lives women lead. In her daily activities a woman is 'shut in' (*κλεισμένη*), 'restricted' (*περιορισμένη*), and 'withdrawn' (*συμμαζεμένη*). A man, unlike a woman, can go out in the evening to relax and forget his worries by drinking and talking with his friends. This confinement, which is stressed by women as such an important feature of their lives, is believed to be responsible for the harmful build-up of anxiety and tension, which may often cause illness.<sup>30</sup>

By becoming an Anastenaris a person is able to emerge from a condition of confinement associated with anxiety and illness and enjoy a cathartic release of emotion which may be of therapeutic value. However, as has been suggested above, from the point of view of Western theories of psychotherapy, more important than the cathartic experience itself is the manner in which it is structured by virtue of the fact that it takes place in the highly patterned ritual context of the Anastenaria. Here I can only suggest briefly the many ways in which such cathartic experiences are structured by the Anastenaria over the course of the career of an Anastenaris before I turn to a more detailed examination of the therapeutic process as it takes place over the course of a single dance of a possessed Anastenaris.

We have already seen that as an Anastenaris gains experience year after year, his behaviour while possessed gradually becomes more structured; his dancing becomes more graceful and easy. While a young, inexperienced Anastenaris may enter trance and begin to dance before the music starts and may

30. The close association of images of confinement with feelings of anxiety and hence with the illnesses such feelings may cause is indicated by the fact that the word most frequently used by villagers to describe feelings of anxiety or worry is *στενοχώρια* (from *στενός* and *χώρος*), which literally means 'narrowness' or 'lack of space'.

continue to dance long after it has stopped, a more experienced Anastenaris is apt to begin and end his dance with the music. Another aspect of the structuring process that takes place over the course of the career of an Anastenaris is the creation of a positive symbiotic relationship between the Anastenaris and St. Constantine.<sup>31</sup> During this process the saint is transformed from a malevolent figure who punishes the Anastenaris by causing illness into a benevolent one who restores him to a state of health and protects him during the firewalk.

The concept of St. Constantine himself also structures the trance experiences of the Anastenaris and plays an important part in bringing about his cure. As he is repeatedly possessed, the Anastenaris gradually internalizes elements of the personality or character of St. Constantine as well as the religious and moral ideals of his society which St. Constantine represents. In this way, over the course of his career, his cathartic experiences are structured, and a state of illness and suffering is transformed into a state of health in which he has access to supernatural power.

This structuring process and the transformation it brings about, which have been examined as they take place on a large time scale over a period of several years, also take place on a much smaller time scale each time an Anastenaris is possessed by St. Constantine and dances. The process is most intense, and the transformation most extreme, during the dance in which a person actually ‘comes out’ and becomes an Anastenaris, although it takes place in a less obvious form each subsequent time he dances.

Whenever the Anastenarides gather in the *konaki* to dance, the lyre player begins to play a slow, seemingly rhythmless tune and to sing a plaintive song about a Greek woman who is separated from her family and home when she is abducted by a Turk.<sup>32</sup> Anastenarides who were previously conversing casually among themselves become sad and quiet. Some stare despondently at the floor, while others begin to cry. The atmosphere in the *konaki*

<sup>31</sup> Crapanzano, ‘Introduction’, in *Case Studies in Spirit Possession*, ed. Crapanzano and Garrison, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> For the texts of this and other songs sung during the ritual gatherings of the Anastenia, see Megas, *Αναστενάρια και έθιμα της Τυρινής Δευτέρας*, pp. 487–90.

is one of intense and anxious expectation. The legs of one Anastenarissa may begin to tremble, her knees striking against each other at a speed well beyond the range of voluntary behaviour. Another Anastenaris may suddenly begin to rock back and forth in his seat, pounding his knees violently with his fists. Anastenarides report that at this time they experience feelings of anxiety, dizziness, and tightness in the chest and throat.

Then suddenly with a piercing shout an Anastenaris may jump up and begin to dance. At this point the lyre player begins to play the faster, more rhythmic 'tune of the dance'. He is joined by the drum player, who begins to beat out a loud rhythm.<sup>33</sup> Soon other Anastenarides enter trance and begin to dance. Frequently the early portions of the dance of the Anastenarides are characterized by wild, violent, and spasmodic movements. For example, an Anastenarissa may begin to writhe and twist in her seat and then fall to the floor where she continues to bounce up and down, dragging herself across the floor with her legs extended out in front of her. It is said that she 'is dancing sitting down' (*χορεύει καθιστή*). Like the period of illness which precedes becoming an Anastenaris, this portion of the individual dance of an Anastenaris is described as a period of suffering and is attributed to the fact that St. Constantine is punishing him.

Other Anastenarides try to ease the suffering of an Anastenaris who is experiencing a difficult trance by comforting him and helping him achieve a transition to a more satisfying trance experience. They try to help him dance more easily by dancing directly in front of him, by shaking him in time to the music, or by placing an arm around his shoulder and dancing with him, teaching him in effect how to dance. Gradually he begins to perform what could more properly be called a dance. He stands upright and moves his feet in time to the music in proper dance steps, clapping, bending low at the waist, or waving with his arm away from his body in a manner characteristic of the dance of the possessed Anastenarides.

At this point the dancing Anastenaris receives from the

33. The importance of drumming in rituals involving trance and possession is discussed in A. Neher, 'A Physiological Explanation of Unusual Behaviour in Ceremonies Involving Drums', *Human Biology*, XXXIV (1962), 151–60.

*archianastenaris* an icon or *simadi* of SS. Constantine and Helen, which he holds for the remainder of his dance. He now dances proudly, even defiantly, holding the icon high over his head, or calmly and peacefully, cradling the icon in his arms. Receiving the icon or *simadi* in his hands symbolizes for the Anastenaris his acquisition of the supernatural power of St. Constantine. It is this power which brings about the transformation of a dance which is an expression of anxiety and suffering into a dance which is an expression of health and joy. This transformation was described by one Anastenarissa as follows: 'It is impossible for you to understand how much the Anastenarissa suffers until she takes the icon in her hands. Then she dances satisfied and pleased.'<sup>34</sup>

Anastenarides report that when the power of St. Constantine comes to them, they experience it as a cool breeze or as an electric shock. They say that when they dance freely and easily they feel light, calm, and joyful. An image frequently used by the Anastenarides to describe this type of dance is that of 'flying like a bird'.<sup>35</sup> With a successful dance the anxiety of an Anastenaris 'leaves' or 'goes out' (*βγαίνει ή στενοχώρια*). The Anastenaris is able to 'get out' or 'remove' whatever was causing his anxiety (*νὰ βγάλει τὸ κακό*). Anastenarides often say that they dance 'in order to vent their emotions' (*γιὰ νὰ ξεσπάσουν*). This phrase, which literally means 'to burst out', clearly suggests a cathartic release from confinement associated with anxiety.

The therapeutic effectiveness of this dance is not limited to the context of gatherings of the Anastenarides at the *konaki* on specific ritual occasions. Any time an Anastenaris experiences severe anxiety or tension, he may enter trance and begin to dance. Consider the following comments of a young woman who had recently become an Anastenarissa and who was in mourning over the death of a young nephew.

Sometimes when I sit at home all by myself, I get very upset. Anxiety grips me (*Μὲ σφίγγει ή στενοχώρια*). I feel just the way I do before I begin to dance at the *konaki*. It is the anxiety of

34. P. Kavakopoulos, 'Η τρίτη ήμέρα τῶν Ἀναστεναῖων, Ἀρχεῖον τοῦ Θρακικοῦ Λαογραφικοῦ καὶ Γλωσσικοῦ Θησαυροῦ, XXI (1956), 283.

35. One elderly Anastenarissa, discussing dream symbolism, said that if one dreams that one is flying, it means that one is free of sin and anxiety.

the dance. Once I was so overcome by anxiety that all I wanted to do was to light the oil lamp above my icon. I lit it, and then I began to dance. My husband came in and tried to stop me because he thought it would upset me even more; but I just pushed him away and continued to dance. After a while I stopped dancing. My worries had passed. They had passed with the help of Saint Constantine.

Other Kostilides report similar cases in which Anastenarides danced on non-ritual occasions in their homes during times of severe stress. One woman recalled that during World War II, when the village of Ayia Eleni was occupied by the Bulgarians, her aunt, who was an Anastenarissa, would dance in her house in front of her family icons. A young Anastenaris said that while he was living in Germany working in a factory he would occasionally become lonely and depressed and begin to cry. He would dance for a short time. Then his wife would light some incense, and he would stop dancing and calm down. Similarly, a young university educated woman said that in times of stress, when she took her entrance examinations for the university, for example, or when someone in her family was seriously ill, her grandmother, who was an Anastenarissa, would dance in front of the family icons. When she finished dancing, she would comfort the other members of the family, assuring them that everything would be all right.

The dance of the Anastenarides is, on the one hand, expressive or symptomatic of feelings associated with suffering and anxiety, and yet, on the other hand, it is expressive of the very opposite – feelings of joy, happiness, and power associated with the relief of suffering and the resolution of anxiety. This ambivalent quality of the dance of the Anastenarides, the very quality by which it is able to transform one complex of emotions into its opposite, can perhaps be more clearly understood if we examine the meaning of dance and its metaphoric extensions in the daily life of the Kostilides and in the wider context of Greek culture as a whole.

Throughout rural Greece dancing plays an important part in the celebrations which accompany joyful occasions such as baptisms, weddings, and village *paniyiria*. Several women of Ayia Eleni told me how eagerly they look forward to the relatively

infrequent occasions when they have the opportunity to dance. They described the feelings of excitement and enthusiasm which dance music arouses in them, as well as the satisfaction and pleasure which they derive from dancing. They also emphasized the cathartic outburst or release of tension (*ξέσπασμα*) which they experience on such occasions.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to these somewhat obvious associations of dance with feelings of joy and happiness as well as with the cathartic release of emotion, images of dance and dancing are used by the Kostilides to express conditions characterized by nervous tension, suffering, punishment, and unpleasant but obligatory activity. For example it is said that a man who is high-strung and irritable is ‘dancing because of his nerves’ (*χορεύει ἀπὸ τὰ νεῦρα τοῦ*). Similarly, the shaking and trembling that may occur during periods of intense stress or anxiety are often referred to as ‘dancing’. A woman who argued frequently with her mother-in-law said, ‘After really bitter arguments with my mother-in-law, I would go and lie down; but my body would be shaking and trembling like a fish. It was as if my body were dancing’ (*οὐαν νὰ χόρεψε τὸ σῶμα μου*). Here images of dancing are used to describe the continuous stream of quick, repetitive activity characteristic of someone experiencing a high degree of nervous tension.

When a young child is slapped or struck by one of his parents as a form of discipline, he ‘dances’, that is, he jumps about, twisting and turning, trying to escape from his parent’s grasp. This ‘dance’ is usually referred to as ‘the dance of the beating’ (*δὲ χορὸς τοῦ ζύλου*). The child’s ‘dance’ is a response to the punishment of his parent, just as the early portion of the dance of the Anastenarides, interpreted as suffering, is a response to the punishment of St. Constantine.

The verb *χορεύω* (‘to dance’), when used transitively, may mean ‘to control’ or ‘to manipulate’. For example, when a strong-willed wife dominates her weak and ineffectual husband, it is said that ‘she dances him any way she pleases’ (*τὸν χορεύει*

36. In N. Kazantzakis, *Βίος καὶ πολιτεία τοῦ Ἀλέξη Ζορμπᾶ* (Athens, 1954), pp. 102–3, Alexis Zorbas explicitly refers to dance as a way for a person νὰ ξεσκάσει (literally ‘to burst out’, and more generally ‘to clear one’s mind’). He says that he danced after the death of his young son, adding that if he had not danced at that moment he would have gone mad from grief.

*δπως θέλει ἐκείνη*), that is, ‘she has him at her beck and call’. In the same way, St. Constantine, who orders the Anastenarides to dance, has complete control over them.

The performance of an unpleasant but obligatory activity is also referred to as ‘dancing’. The proverb ‘if you join the dance, you will dance’ (*ἄμα μπεῖς στὸ χορό, θὰ χορέψεις*) implies that if you become involved with a certain group, then you must carry out the activity in which that group is engaged. This proverb not only suggests that dancing is an activity which one must be forced to perform, but also illustrates the use of the image of a dance to define a group of people who are collectively separated from others by virtue of their performance of a certain activity.<sup>37</sup>

The phrase ‘I did it, and I danced’ (*τὸ κανά καὶ χόρεψα*) is used by Kostilides to mean ‘I did it, and I paid the penalty’, or ‘I did it, and I suffered the consequences’. It refers to something the speaker did that he should not have done. Consider the case of a woman who for many years had served a ritual meal to the Anastenarides in her house during the *paniyiri* of SS. Constantine and Helen. One year she decided to stop serving this meal. A short time later her son became severely ill. After many time-consuming, costly, and futile trips to physicians in nearby cities, the old woman finally invited the Anastenarides to her house in the hope that they might be of help. The *archianastenaris* told her that her son would not regain his health until she resumed serving the meal. After she agreed to do so, her son did in fact regain his health. Referring to her decision to stop serving the meal, the woman said, ‘I did it, and I danced’.

These examples suggest the ambivalent nature of the dance of the Anastenarides. Each time an Anastenaris is possessed, a dance expressive of anxiety and suffering is transformed into a dance expressive of joy and access to supernatural power. This transformation is brought about by the structuring process that the dance of the Anastenarides imposes on the outbursts of intense emotion and motor discharge which are evoked as the Anastenaris enters trance. During each dance, wild, clumsy, and often violent behaviour is structured according to the rhythmic and kinesic rules and patterns of the dance of the Anastenarides and is transformed into a graceful dance of power and beauty.

37. Thus people who are not Anastenarides are referred to as ‘outside the dance’ (*ἐξω δπ' τὸ χορό*).

This transformation, which reaches its climax when the Anastenaris takes the icon or *simadi* of SS. Constantine and Helen in his hands, is structurally parallel to the transformation from a state of illness to a state of health which takes place over the course of the career of the Anastenaris and which reaches its climax when he ‘comes out’, dances, and is cured. Both these transformations are brought about through dance. It is in this sense that the dance of the possessed Anastenarides is an essential feature of the ritual therapy of the Anastenaria.

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